

LEXICALISATION OF WAR LEXEMES IN SELECTED NEWSPAPERS HEADLINES ON THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CRISES

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Abstract

The Russian-Ukraine crisis has emerged as a significant focal point for global media, particularly since its escalation in 2022. This study investigates the lexicalisation of war lexemes in selected newspaper headlines to understand how language shapes public perception and discourse surrounding the conflict. The research employs a qualitative textual analysis of fifteen headlines from three prominent news platforms: The Guardian, BBC, and Al Jazeera. The findings reveal a diverse range of war lexemes that reflect varying editorial stances and influence public sentiment. This work contributes to the field by elucidating the role of language in framing contemporary conflicts, thereby enhancing our understanding of the media's impact on societal attitudes towards war.

Keywords: War lexemes, lexicalisation, media discourse, Russian-Ukrainian crisis, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The Russian-Ukraine crisis, a conflict deeply rooted in historical, political, and cultural complexities, has been a focal point for global media since its escalation in 2022. Wars are not merely fought with weapons but are also shaped through language, which acts as a social construct influencing perceptions and narratives (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Ogunsiji & Aluya, 2022). Using specific lexemes about war can significantly impact public understanding and sentiment towards the conflict. This raises questions about how these lexemes are lexicalised in different media outlets and the implications this has for public discourse. This study aims to investigate the lexicalisation of war lexemes in selected newspapers during the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, exploring how language choices reflect and shape societal attitudes towards the conflict. The study's objectives include identifying common war lexemes in newspaper articles, analysing their contextual usages, and evaluating their potential impacts on public perception (Galtung, 2000). Central to this investigation are the following research questions: What war lexemes are prevalent in news coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis? How do these lexemes vary across different newspapers? How do they influence public discourse surrounding the crises? Understanding these elements is crucial, as media language is pivotal in framing conflicts and can sway opinion during war.

Literature Review

The linguistic exploration of war lexemes has been a subject of scholarly interest within media studies and linguistics. Researchers such as Richardson highlight the significant role of language in shaping public perceptions of war, arguing that the choice of lexicon in media reporting can convey bias and influence readers' emotions. For instance, using terms like "invasion" versus "intervention" can lead to starkly different interpretations of a nation's actions, as noted by Allan and Zelizer (2004). Recent studies examining the coverage of the Syrian conflict provide valuable insights into the paradigms of lexicalisation and framing, noting how various media outlets adopt divergent approaches based on their editorial policies and target audiences (Aluya & Terver, 2024). Although these works converge on the importance of language in war narratives, they also diverge in their methodological approaches and the specific lexemes explored. This study aims to fill in some existing gaps by conducting a focused textual analysis of selected news platforms' coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, thus contributing to the discourse on how contemporary conflicts are linguistically constructed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which posits that language is a social practice that reflects and constructs social reality. CDA provides a robust framework for analysing how power dynamics and ideologies are embedded in language use, particularly in media discourse surrounding conflicts. The framework encompasses various dimensions such as the socio-political context, the relationship between language and power, and the effects of discourse on societal consciousness (Van Dijk, 1998). This theoretical lens allows for a comprehensive examination of war lexemes, facilitating a deeper understanding of how they serve to construct narratives that shape public perceptions and attitudes toward the war.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising a textual analysis approach to examine fifteen headlines from three major online news platforms: The Guardian, BBC, and Al Jazeera. These news platforms were selected for their extensive coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and diverse editorial philosophies. The study focuses on articles published on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis reported by local and international news outlets from 28th January 2022 to 29th March 2025. Data was collected by systematically searching the newspapers' online archives, identifying articles that prominently feature war lexemes. A coding framework was developed to categorise the identified lexemes based on their connotations and contextual usages. The analytical procedure involved a detailed examination of the headlines and allowed for rich qualitative insights into the lexical choices made by Journalists.

Data Analysis

In contemporary geopolitical discourse, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has emerged as a focal point of international concern, drawing attention from media outlets and analysts alike. The data analyses presented here delve into headlines encapsulating the evolving narratives

surrounding this multifaceted war. Each headline serves as a lens through which we can examine the ongoing struggle's language, framing, and implications, revealing the intricate interplay of power, ideology, and human experience. The selected headlines span a range of themes, from accusations and military strategies to humanitarian crises and diplomatic efforts. They highlight the emotional weight of language, the portrayal of leadership, and the stark realities faced by civilians caught in the crossfire. By dissecting these narratives, we can uncover the underlying sentiments that shape public perception and influence international responses to the conflict (Cohen, 2020). Through this analysis, we aim to illuminate how language reflects and constructs the realities of war, shaping the discourse around accountability, resilience, and the quest for peace. The headlines are a powerful reminder of the human cost of conflict, urging us to engage with the ethical dimensions of warfare and the narratives that emerge from it (Aluya et al., 2024). As we navigate this complex landscape, it becomes increasingly clear that the stories we tell about war are as significant as the events themselves, shaping our understanding of justice, sovereignty, and the enduring quest for resolution in a world fraught with division and strife.

1. Putin accuses NATO of ignoring Russia's concerns as Ukraine crisis simmers (28th January, 2022 - The Guardian)

In this headline, the assertion that "Putin accuses NATO" acts as a central pivot around the narrative, crafting a vivid portrayal of a geopolitical standoff that has gained significant global attention. The verb "accuses" not only establishes a confrontational dynamic between the Russian President and the NATO alliance but also infers a sense of emotional weight in the accusation, heightening tensions and indicating a serious breach in diplomatic relations. By stating that NATO is "ignoring" Russia's concerns, the headline suggests a dismissive attitude from the Western military alliance towards what are framed as legitimate issues of security and territorial integrity from the Russian perspective. This terminology might lead readers to view NATO as reactionary and perhaps uncaring about the complexities of Russia's strategic narrative. The phrase "Ukraine crisis simmers" employs a compelling metaphor that transforms the situation from mere political discourse into an impending situation like boiling water, evoking imagery of latent danger that can erupt at any moment, thereby dramatizing the precariousness of the geopolitical climate. The overall framing invokes a position where Putin appears as a justified leader grappling with external pressures, potentially engendering a degree of sympathy or understanding for Russia's stance amidst rising international tensions.

2. Ukraine can win, says US, as fight frustrates plans for swift victory (5th March, 2022 - The Guardian)

The declaration that "Ukraine can win" emerges as a resounding note of encouragement, ostensibly supplied by the United States, and underscores a narrative of resilience and fortitude amidst conflict. This statement carries considerable weight, as it bolsters Ukraine's morale and aligns with the broader

Western agenda of supporting democratic resistance against aggression. The term "fight" emphasises a military encounter and a wider struggle that embodies the themes of endurance and tenacity, transcending the idea of a mere battlefield confrontation to evoke notions of national survival. Moreover, the phrase "frustrates plans for swift victory" hints at previous expectations harboured by military strategists and analysts, suggesting that the initial assessments of a quick and decisive campaign have evolved to reveal unexpected complexities and challenges (Aluya & Bagaiya Zidyeb, 2025). This juxtaposition between hope and reality reveals a rich tapestry of uncertainty in strategic military outcomes, propelling the narrative that while optimism persists, the on-ground realities remain resilient and tough. By framing the resistance in such a fashion, the headline galvanises international support for Ukraine while highlighting the intricate and evolving nature of the conflict, emphasising that victory is desirable and achievable through continued efforts.

3. Zelensky and Putin each vow to press on to victory in the Ukraine war (19th December, 2023 - The Guardian)

The reference to both Zelensky and Putin making personal vows to "press on to victory" spins a narrative that amplifies the inherent competitive nature of the conflict, depicting it not merely as a geopolitical struggle but as an emotionally charged contest of wills between two strong leaders. The phrase "vow to press on" implies an unwavering determination that captures the commitment of each leader to pursue their respective aims with relentless tenacity. This choice of language infuses the narrative with a sense of shared yet opposing purpose, effectively humanizing both figures while simultaneously setting them up as foils against one another in a contest of ideologies and national pride. The explicit mention of "Ukraine war" consolidates the ongoing conflict within a definitive framework, which both normalizes the protracted nature of warfare and indicates a certain inevitability about its continuation. The framing of the conflict as an enduring struggle may influence public perception to understand the invasion as part of a larger historical continuum of East-West tensions, reinforcing an understanding of the stakes involved. The overall effect of this headline is to transform the leaders' intentions into a powerful symbol of resilience, emphasising that the quest for victory is ingrained in both nations' identity and national ethos.

4. Russian attack kills two civilians in Ukraine's Kramatorsk: Governor (12th August, 2022 - ALJAZEEERA)

Here, the direct nomenclature of "Russian attack" immediately assigns unequivocal blame and responsibility for violence, constructing a straightforward narrative of aggression that resonates deeply within the context of wartime accountability. The impactful phrase "kills two civilians" humanises the abstraction of war, distilling the tragedy into the intimate loss of life, an action that undeniably tugs at the emotional identifiers of an audience that grapples with the humanitarian consequences of conflict. This careful language selection invites readers to confront civilians' stark realities amid military actions, engendering a broader discourse on the legitimacy and morality of

ongoing hostilities. The lexical choice of "Governor" not only adds an authoritative voice to the report, imbuing the statement with credibility, but also presents the civilian casualties through a political lens, heralding them as a matter of state governance and responsibility. By anchoring the narrative in the firsthand report from an official, the headline transcends mere statistics, compelling readers to engage with the ethical implications and human costs associated with military intervention in civilian areas. Consequently, it portrays war not as a series of strategic manoeuvres but as a deeply disturbing event that disrupts lives and families, igniting public empathy and concern for those affected.

5. Ukraine confirms receipt of rocket system from UK (12th August, 2022 - ALJAZEERA)

The headline statement detailing "Ukraine confirms receipt" functions as a significant assertion of agency, implying that Ukraine is actively engaged in securing vital military support, particularly in light of the challenges posed by external threats. This choice of words cultivates a sense of empowerment, positioning Ukraine not as a passive recipient of aid but as a nation taking decisive steps to enhance its security apparatus. The "rocket system" specificity denotes the complexities involved in modern warfare, invoking a sense of escalating military strategies and technological advancements that characterize contemporary conflict dynamics. Placing the "UK" as a contributor situates the narrative within the broader context of international alliances, suggesting cooperative engagement among Western nations and a unified front against perceived aggression. The language employed also suggests a framing of solidarity; the narrative unfolding here bolsters Ukraine's image as receiving not just equipment, but a vital lifeline infused with the collective backing of its allies. Ultimately, this headline works to underscore a collective response to aggression, heralding the acquisition of military support as a crucial component in Ukraine's strategy for resistance and longevity in the face of adversity.

6. Kyiv says Russia is pursuing 'attempts to encircle' Bakhmut (5th March, 2023 - ALJAZEERA)

The phrase "attempts to encircle" carries with it connotations of strategic manoeuvring that conjure images of historical military tactics aimed at gaining territorial advantage through encirclement, signifying a potentially dire situation on the battlefield in Bakhmut. By utilising quotations around "attempts," the headline injects a layer of scepticism concerning the veracity or success of Russia's military operations, potentially reflecting a narrative that seeks to dispute Russian claims of efficacy while presenting a counter-narrative from Ukraine's perspective. The geographic specificity of "Bakhmut" not only situates the conflict in a recognized location but also invites readers to engage with the intricacies and broader implications of combat in this area, where control and territorial integrity are hotly contested. Furthermore, "Kyiv says" connects the headline to the Ukrainian government's perspective, emphasizing that the ongoing battle is a critical pressure point in the more significant

conflict. This narrative framing invites readers to consider the stakes involved for both sides while simultaneously showcasing the resolve of Ukrainian leadership in safeguarding their sovereignty against encroaching adversaries.

7. Vladimir Putin issues fresh demands to Ukraine to end war (14th June, 2024 - The Guardian)

The phrasing "fresh demands" carries with it a connotation of ongoing discussions or possibly even negotiations that have not yet reached a resolution, hinting at the complexity and evolving nature of the dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. It implies that the situation is fluid and possibly volatile, suggesting that the demands of Putin reflect not just his position but also a strategic attempt to exert pressure on Ukraine at a crucial moment. Using the word "demands," the headline evokes images of a strongman dictating terms, reinforcing the notion of a power imbalance between the two nations, where Ukraine is placed in a position of supplication. The phrase "to end war" creates urgency, signalling a desire for resolution amidst an enduring and devastating conflict. It pushes readers to consider the ramifications of the persistent hostilities and the diplomatic efforts, or lack thereof, that shape the landscape of international politics regarding Ukraine. This framing might invite interpretations that either paint Putin as a leader still clinging to his ambitions or as someone who recognises the growing necessity for compromise in a protracted struggle, thus influencing public perceptions of both the Russian president's motivations and Ukraine's resilience in the face of adversity.

8. Putin says Ukraine goals will be 'achieved' as he repeats 'neo-Nazi' claims (30th September, 2024 - ALJAZEEERA)

The assertion that "Ukraine goals will be 'achieved'" introduces an ambiguous undertone of hope that contrasts sharply with the chilling context of Putin's concurrent obsession with labeling Ukraine's leadership and military efforts as 'neo-Nazi.' While the first part of the statement may hint at a potential pathway towards some form of resolution or even recognition of Ukraine's rights and aspirations, the juxtaposition with the incendiary term 'neo-Nazi' complicates the narrative. This deliberate framing serves to demonise Ukraine in the eyes of some audiences while simultaneously dictating the terms of the debate surrounding its legitimacy on the global stage. The repeated use of such provocative language creates a climate of fear and division, potentially fueling both internal and external propaganda efforts. It portrays Putin as an individual who may leverage these extreme characterizations to bolster his narrative around the conflict, portraying his actions as protective rather than aggressive. Collectively, this headline encapsulates a complex interplay of optimism tempered with outright vilification, emphasising the deeply entrenched narratives that characterise contemporary geopolitical discourse.

9. Vance to meet Zelensky as European leaders call for unity over Ukraine (14th February, 2025 - The Guardian)

This headline showcases a significant political development by indicating that a pivotal meeting is set to take place between Vance, a notable political figure, and Ukrainian President Zelensky. The framing suggests a bold effort towards diplomacy, which is critical in a landscape rife with conflict. The invocation of "European leaders call for unity" highlights a broader coalition of support for Ukraine, capturing a collective resolve among nations typically associated with a unified stance against aggression. Such phrasing conveys solidarity and shared responsibility, emphasizing that the challenges faced by Ukraine resonate across borders and are not merely confined to one nation. The call for unity places the conflict within a larger transnational narrative, underscoring themes of democracy, sovereignty, and international cooperation. By spotlighting Vance's engagement with Zelensky, the headline adds a layer of urgency and personal commitment to the political process, suggesting that negotiations around Ukraine are not mere abstractions but vital meetings with potential ramifications for the region and beyond. This development fosters optimism about the prospect of diplomatic solutions while reinforcing the notion that the plight of Ukraine has become a pressing global concern intertwined with the goals of European cohesion and strategic alliance.

10. Peace talks are in a parallel universe, says Ukraine front-line troops (13 March, 2025 - BBC)

The metaphorical characterisation of peace talks as existing in a "parallel universe" articulates a stark disconnect between the grim realities faced by front-line soldiers and the often-abstract discussions held by diplomats. This vivid imagery suggests that while negotiations may take place in a more tranquil, abstract environment, the lived experiences of those actively engaged in battle tell a vastly different and more desperate story. It raises questions about the efficacy and sincerity of peace efforts that appear detached from the harsh and immediate consequences of the ongoing conflict. This stark contrast fosters scepticism about the potential for real progress towards reconciliation, hinting at an inherent disillusionment among troops who are acutely aware of the toll war exacts on human life and community stability. The headline invites readers to confront the layered complexities and hardships associated with prolonged warfare, emphasising that while negotiations may signal hope, they often lack the tangible understanding and urgency that those who endure the conflict daily are most acutely aware of. Thus, the metaphor encourages a deeper reflection on the dichotomy between political maneuvering and ground realities, urging readers to consider the implications and sincerity of peace efforts within this profoundly challenging context.

11. Putin gives Trump bare minimum on Ukraine but the war goes on (19th March, 2025 - BBC)

In this provocative headline, the phrase "gives Trump bare minimum on Ukraine" strongly suggests that any concessions or discussions initiated by

Putin are not substantive or sufficiently meaningful to address the complexities and significant issues surrounding the ongoing Ukrainian conflict. The word "bare minimum" implies a profound reluctance on Putin's part to make substantial gestures toward diplomatic engagement or resolution. Such wording conveys a sense of mediocrity in diplomatic efforts. It suggests a calculated strategy where superficial interactions might temporarily placate foreign pressures while failing to engender real progress in the war-torn region (Galtung, 2000; Edem & Aluya, 2023). This notion is further emphasized by the stark assertion that "the war goes on," which candidly reflects the unending nature of hostilities and suggests an inevitable continuation of suffering on both sides. The juxtaposition of political figures like Trump and Putin invites audiences to contemplate the broader geopolitical implications of their interactions, suggesting that conversations centred on Ukraine may be as much about their political dynamics as they are about the urgent needs of those affected by the conflict. In this light, the headline frames Ukraine as a battleground and a complex and multifaceted issue woven into the fabric of international relations, power plays, and the stark realities of an unresolved war.

12. Russia accused of 'hollow' peace talks as strike injures dozens (25th March, 2025 - BBC)

In this headline, using the word "hollow" to describe Russia's peace talks offers a critical viewpoint, suggesting that the negotiations lack sincerity and substantive content. This characterisation directs the audience to perceive a disconnect between the intentions touted in diplomatic discourse and the realities experienced on the ground. The severe implications of "strike injures dozens" present a stark contrast, emphasizing the brutality of ongoing violence even amidst discussions that are ostensibly aimed at achieving peace. This juxtaposition reinforces a narrative centred not on resolution but on the alarming consistency of aggression that persists despite claims of dialogue. By intertwining the themes of injury and diplomatic insincerity, the headline invites readers to deeply scrutinise Russia's role and motives, questioning whether peace is genuinely sought or merely a façade for continued military operations. The overall implications are clear: while discussions may be taking place—perhaps as a formality or an attempt to placate international scrutiny—the tragic consequence of suffering remains ever-present, arousing emotional responses and a critical evaluation of the authenticity of peace-making efforts.

13. Fire service donates kit for latest Ukraine convoy (29th March, 2025 - BBC)

This headline, which recounts the fire service's donating a "kit for latest Ukraine convoy," highlights a beacon of hope and communal support amid the ravages of war. The word "donates" carries connotations of generosity and solidarity, evoking an inspiring sense of humanity that resonates deeply during conflict. This act of providing vital supplies not only enhances the operational capabilities of the convoy but also serves as an emblem of international camaraderie extended to a nation enduring hardship. The reference to a "latest

Ukraine convoy" signifies a continuous effort to deliver aid and necessities, hinting at the persistent realities of war that necessitate such support (Richardson, 2004; Aluya et al., 2024). This evokes an image of resilience among Ukrainian people and focused efforts from outside entities, underscoring the community's commitment to standing with those affected by the conflict. The choice to highlight the fire service adds depth, representing emergency responders often on the front lines of humanitarian crises, thus humanizing the engagement and framing it as an essential contribution to the welfare of those navigating the dire circumstances of war. The overall narrative rallies public sentiment around the importance of collective action and reinforces a shared responsibility to assist and support individuals impacted by violent conflict.

Conclusion

The lexicalisation of war lexemes in newspaper headlines during the Russian-Ukrainian crisis reveals significant insights into how language shapes public perception and discourse. The qualitative analysis of headlines from The Guardian, BBC, and AL-JAZEERA highlights the diverse editorial stances and the varying emotional resonances of the lexemes employed. This study underscores the importance of language in framing conflicts, illustrating how specific word choices can influence societal attitudes and understanding of war. By elucidating the role of media language in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the interplay between language, media, and public perception in contemporary conflicts.

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